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ABSTRACT

It became fashionable in the 1960's for members of the community to become involved with education, but at the same time this involvement has forced the two extreme groups in society, the rich and the poor, into an uneasy consensus about the public education system. The author points out several factors which help shape the community's attitude toward the school, including the local control issues. The community's attitude toward reading has been shaped and is being shaped, says the author, by three factors: a comparison of center-city school students' reading progress with that of students from other schools, the proposal of United States Commissioner of Education James Allen that every person has a right to read, and the appearance of black authors speaking out for blacks. The author underscores the importance of developing reading as a communicative skill that must be preceded by the development of listening and speaking skills in the center-city schools. References are included. (NH)

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COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD READING

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At a community meeting in the summer of 1969, in a crowded "center-city" school auditorium, the neighborhood residents listened to an excellent presentation of a proposal for a locally-controlled Magnet School which hopefully would upgrade the educational opportunities of all the neighborhood youngsters. A feeling of hope could be sensed in the expressions of the people as the speaker extolled the virtues of this proposed educational complex. When the community residents had the opportunity to react, nowever, a rather well-dressed, middle-aged woman responded that such an enormous outlay of money was ridiculous since the "Community" did not know how to take care of its schools. She described the neighborhood schools as "dirty, unkept sewer-disposals" which the people allowed to grow and fester with benign unconcern. "To give the people another school," she contended, "would be an outrageous abuse of public money!"

RE002 818

Her remarks did not go uncontested. One woman responded that the community school was not the "people's school," but rather it belonged to an establishment which ignored and resented the ideas and concerns of the people in the community. "The public school buildings stand in our neighborhood as isolated citidels preserving a culture and value system that is foreign to youngsters who attend them!" she retorted. "Give us control of our schools, and we will take care of them," was the sentiment expressed by a number of residents.

Community Attitude Toward Education

Perhaps the incident described above helps to illustrate some of the perplexing problems that "Community Concern" has brought to public education. While it became fashionable in the 1960's to espouse the idea of community involvement in education, it ironically has made uncomfortable bedfellows of two extreme population sectors of our emerging American life-style patterns. The more affluent, with some exceptions, have become disenchanted with the neighborhood school. For example, witness the regular defeat of school bond issues in our suburbs, or the choice of schools of the wealthy who populate the exclusive high-rise apartments that barricade the center-city. The poor, on the other hand, express their concern for the neighborhood school in terms of betrayal and disparagement. Indeed, the idea of "Community Concern" has forced the two extreme groups in our society, the rich and the poor, into an uneasy concensus about our public education system. While public school teachers and administrators are keenly aware of the uneasy ground upon which they practice their profession, the vastness and complexity of the system makes any response both ponderous and ineffective. The Oceanhill-Brownsville fiasco

is a classic example of how concerned residents and professional teachers and administrators responded to the problems of a child's education.

It should be pointed out that the problem of trying to define community attitudes toward education is a very perplexing one. It is extremely difficult to define community when the "-unity" implied is scrutinized carefully. A neighborhood composed of whites, blacks and latins may give strong lip service to the concept of community when such unity may result in a sizeable grant for a recreation center or a hospital, but once the community surface is punctured while working out the nitty-gritty of the details, strong anti-racial and ethnic attitudes are found to exist. Questions are raised frequently, for example, as "Who speaks for the blacks?"; "Is this the opinion of the white residents?"; "Is this group speaking for the latin community?" The answers to such questions, so often raised, could conceivably lead one to deny the fact that there is any such thing as "community"! To be sure, every person moves in and out of many groups each day. If each constitutes a community, then community, by its very nature, must be amorphous, transitory and elusive. To attempt to be conclusive about community attitudes would render such conclusions suspect and open to dispute.

Factors Shaping Community Attitude

If the above considerations are in any way accurate, consider the problems that must be encountered in the schools themselves. Within the past months, several principals were dismissed because a group of residents marched on the school and demanded that this be done. Were the residents representative of the community? Was the principal really inept? Was the

Board of Education offering "Due Process"? Obviously, community attitude can help form some strange educational policies. Dr. Kirman described one principal in this situation who solved his problem by using the Afro-American faculty members as a barometer. If they complained, he complained. If they were silent, he was silent. His policy seemed to work, and he maintained rapport within the community. While this is commendable, it is to be questioned whether education policies are based on solid undergirdings or promulgated on the wings of expediency. Educational disaster could result if policies are not rooted in the convictions of all the communities within the school community.

Another factor that is intimately connected with community attitude is local control. It is becoming strikingly evident that the concept of local control must include local standards or norms. While many center-city residents look with dismay when they see the reading scores of their neighborhood school compared with the national average, it is regrettable that they turn in anger toward the school. What local control should mean in this situation is that the local community, in cooperation with the school, should set up norms for their children that are realistic. It should result in a systematic appraisal of the reading picture for each student with the hope of eventually achieving the national norm. Failure on the part of local residents to launch a program that meets local needs will only result, as President Nixon states, in greater stress on national norms. "When local officials do not respond to a local need, the search begins for a level of officialdom that will

do so, and all too often in the past, this search has ended in Washington." Described differently, Nixon continues, "I am determined to see to it that the flow of power in education goes toward, and not away from, the local community." For this to happen, however, the local community must resolve its own internal problems before determining the specific educational objectives of its own students.

Accountability is a word that is being used frequently in considering educational and behavioral objectives. While this term has levels of meaning depending on the person using it, one meaning should be clear to those working on the community level. Basically, the community school should be accountable to its local residents, and, in turn, listen carefully to what the residents are saying. Unfortunately, the suburban school is much more sensitive to community reactions, since it must periodically render an account to the community when a school bond issue arises. Residents in the center-city do not have this kind of accountability from its neighborhood school. Rather, the Board of Education graciously grants two days of open hearings to interested citizens where they may tell the Board of their hopes, aspirations, fears and complaints. The Board, however, absolves itself from any compulsion to reply. This lack of accountability is perhaps the most serious problem in the area of community attitudes toward public education. Again, President Nixon stated recently in his education message to Congress, "The avoidance of accountability is the single most serious threat to a continued and even more pluralistic educational system." The President was looking directly at this problem of community attitude when he stated that success can only be measured in terms of results achieved in a "particular school and for a particular set

of pupils." In this undertaking, it is imperative that local schools take account of community attitudes, desires and values, and that the local community and school collaborate on setting up specific procedures for accountability.

Community Attitudes Toward Reading

It is understandable that the results of any survey on community attitudes toward reading would reveal a lack of sophistication of knowledge of particular reading skills, methods or materials that would be found among teachers or reading specialists. Opinions on the status of teaching reading among residents of the center-city usually begin and end with a vituperative attack on the much maligned sweethearts of elementary education, Dick and Jane. Yet this lack of professional insight into the teaching of reading should not be interpreted to mean that the residents of the center-city do not have any clear "attitudes" toward reading. Several factors have been responsible for the cultivation of community attitudes.

For the past several years, the Boards of Education in our larger cities have published the reading scores of each of the schools. Great attention is given in all the newspapers to the problem of reading. Why, they ask, are the schools not producing adequate readers, but also, why are the children getting worse as they continue through school. Each year the schools affirm the findings of the famed Coleman Report that in center-city schools the students regress rather than progress academically as they seemingly climb the educational ladder. Local communities are extremely sensitive to these reports and wonder if their

children are not the recipients of second or third-rate education. Not being capable of pin-pointing the problem of the teaching of reading per se, local communities couch their grievances in terms of "racism," "middle-class values," "bussing," etc. If the center-city schools were producing good readers, much of the invective that now exists would be dispelled.

A second factor that has begun to shape community attitude is the proposal of James Allen, United States Commissioner of Education, that every person has a "right to read." While the United States Office of Education does not know precisely what kinds of programs the "Right to Read" proposal will envision, it has become evident that, in center-city communities, residents have begun to espouse this "right" in the same context as they espouse the right to vote or the right to free speech. Although this espousal may not be justified, it cannot be denied that community groups are no longer questioning the poor acquisition of reading skills, but rather are demanding that this right to read is theirs by the mere fact that they live in this country. The school's response to this demand could very well determine the very nature and existence of our schools in the 1970's.

A third factor that has shaped community attitudes toward reading has become very evident in the black communities. For the first time in black history in the United States, the black people have developed a group of authors that not only speak for them, but, more germain to our subject, write for them. There are very few blacks that are not

aware of the meteoric rise of black authors in the past decade. Certainly, there is no one author who speaks for all the blacks, but it is important to realize that all blacks have taken pride in the fact that their own authors now receive serious attention in the book review sections in our leading journals. Community attitudes in black neighborhoods have changed with respect to the value that is now placed on the ability to read. They now have materials that they wish to read - that is fashionable for them to read. While reading experts discuss the relative merits of teaching reading through the Language Experience Approach, or the Linguistic Approach, or through Programmed Instruction, it might be well to remember that behind these pedagogical ponderings, the real reading teachers in the black community might well be the Malcolm X's, the Eldrich Cleaver's and the James Baldwin's!

Despite the fact that there is a sizeable segment of our population who contend that we are now in a post-literary period, that we really do not have to know how to read to survive, the emerging attitudes in our center-cities might seem to contradict this point of view. As youngsters begin to move along in school they are becoming more convinced that there are writers who are talking to them. They are listening and they want to read, but, unfortunately, teachers reflect great confusion in their response. For example, several imaginative early childhood programs (Gray, 1966; Weikart, 1964; Stearns, 1966; Deutsch, 1964) have produced varying strategies for teachers. It is extremely difficult for teachers to react to their students' needs when there are so many diverse opinions on what they should do.

It is entirely possible that the desire to teach the various reading skills has produced a communication gap between teachers and the children

they so earnestly desire to help. A study of reading as a professional science too often draws teachers to embrace certain methods, techniques and materials that, while good in themselves, may unwittingly establish a set of reading goals for the teacher that in no way relate to the goals of the students. Furthermore, by the mere fact that a teacher is a college graduate, she has acquired values and attitudes that by their very nature could estrange her from the students she teaches. While teachers are enjoying the "Great Debate" (for example, analytical vs. non-analytical approaches to teaching word recognition), the students in the center-city sit morosely in their classrooms and dream of dropouts, drugs and drag-races!

It is not suggested here that the professional study of the teaching of reading is irrevelant. Rather it is suggested that it will be of no consequence if the study produces opinionated teachers and indifferent students.

Stated in a different way, the question is not how to teach word recognition skills in the center-city, but when. Launching a youngster into the perplexing waters of vowels, digraphs, blends and dipthongs may set him adrift educationally for the rest of his life. A teacher who can time the teaching of these essentials so that the student appreciates their value, will achieve greater success than one who "teaches by the book." Timing, not time, is the most essential element in the teaching of reading. To claim that Johnny now reads on the fourth grade level is pure fantasy when Johnny has learned also to hate reading.

It should not be implied at this point that youngsters should sit in the early grades and "tune the wireless sweetly." Rather, a teacher can present a climate of openness and honesty in her relationship with the students through various projects and discussions. A total language arts approach that places great stress on listening and speaking, exchanging ideas, music, art, games, etc. can produce a climate that will make the teaching and learning of reading a real true joy. Learning to read then becomes a consequence of other learning activities, rather than an obstacle to be hurdled before anything interesting happens in the world of the mind.

Finally, it is difficult to come to any definitive conclusions in the area of community attitudes, since the slightest ripple in society often causes significant changes. It might be well to reflect, however, on the conclusions of a recent study by Gary T. Marx in his work, Protest and Prejudice. This noted Harvard sociologist and student of black opinion states that "5 to 20 per cent of the black population (from 1 to 4 million people) hold attitudes indicating a depth of estrangement and bitterness unique in American history." Fortunately, this climate does not have to prevail, and sensitive, realistic teaching of reading could well serve to roll back the barriers of polarization. It will not be achieved, however, by changing the names and color of Dick and Jane, or by organizing a search to discover better ways of presenting inflectional endings. The answer must be in developing reading as a communicative skill that must be preceded by the development of listening and speaking skills. If our center-city communities are saying anything, it is that they want a voice; they want to be heard; they want a piece of the action!

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